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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5860
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0770
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 0332
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0729
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0990
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0138
RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0750
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000781

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, S/CT, P
NSC FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT
LONDON FOR LORD
PARIS FOR NOBLES

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN RESPONSE ON INTER-AGENCY DELEGATION
PROPOSAL: AN INVITATION TO U/S BURNS TO LEAD IT

REF: A. DAMASCUS 756

[1](#)B. STATE 112828

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, for reasons 1.4 b,d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Vice Minister (V/M) Faisal Miqdad's Chief of Staff (COS) Husam Aala informed Charge November 5 that the Syrian Embassy in Washington would be conveying an invitation to U/S Burns to lead a U.S. inter-agency delegation to Syria during the second half of November. (Note: Miqdad's November 4 letter to U/S Burns emailed separately to NEA and P staff.) Aala clarified Burns' participation would allow the U.S. and Syria to continue dialogue on bilateral and regional issues, "in a wider political context." Syria welcomed S/CT Ambassador Benjamin and others as a part of the delegation's meetings with the MFA and "others." Separately, Aala said the MFA had delivered instructions to Ambassador Mustafa to issue pending visas for the DHS circuit riders, though the State Department's explanation of Miqdad's treatment at Dulles Airport was "unsatisfactory." Aala also expressed personal misgivings about points conveyed in Ref B on the Goldstone Report and confirmed Syria had gone unrepresented at the BMENA conference. End Summary.

Upping the Ante by Inviting U/S Burns

[1](#)2. (C) Following up Ref A discussions on October 26 regarding a U.S. proposal to send S/CT Coordinator Ambassador Benjamin to Damascus, V/M Miqdad's COS Husam Aala told Charge and Pol/Econ Chief that Miqdad would be sending an invitation to U/S Burns to visit Damascus. Responding to the Charge's questions, Aala clarified the purpose of the invitation was to "continue the dialogue on the full range of bilateral and regional issues" that Miqdad had discussed in Washington. The SARG welcomed Ambassador Benjamin and others as a part of the delegation, and the MFA would arrange meetings "with the Ministry and others," said Aala. Miqdad, Aala added, had informed his U.S. interlocutors that Syria would agree to an inter-agency visit "in a wider political context." The Vice

Minister, who was still convalescing at home after a four-day hospital stay related to heart problems, hoped U/S Burns' schedule would permit him to visit Damascus during the last half of November.

DHS Visas A Go, but SARG Unsatisfied with Airport Treatment

13. (C) Aala confirmed that the MFA had issued instructions to the Syrian Embassy in Washington to issue pending DHS circuit rider visas. Alaa explained one reason for the delay stemmed from the need for the MFA to consult with "other government organizations." He also pointed to the lack of proper coordination between the State Department, Embassy Damascus, the Syrian Embassy in Washington, and the Syrian MFA. Aala urged respect for the trilateral agreement among the U.S., Syria, and UNCHR, which requires UNHCR to provide a list of refugee cases to be processed prior to the submission of the circuit riders' visa applications.

14. (C) Aala noted the delay in issuing the visas also resulted from Miqdad's treatment at Dulles Airport on his departure from Washington (ref A). The Syrian Embassy in Washington had received an explanation from the State Department regarding this episode, but the MFA viewed it to be "unsatisfactory." The issue of not exempting V/M Miqdad from security search procedures because of his rank was not convincing because the Syrian MFA accorded the Vice Minister the same status and privileges as the Foreign Minister. Alaa

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said Miqdad had taken great exception not to being asked to remove his shoes and walk through a metal detector, but rather to the "random" patting down he received afterwards. "To Syrians, this treatment is routine enough that it appears anything but random," he said. FM Muallim's delegation members had also received similar treatment when departing from New York after the UN General Assembly, noted Alaa. The Syrian MFA, he continued, accorded U.S. visitors with every privilege and amenity requested by the U.S. Embassy. "How would you like it if Syrian security services subjected Assistant Secretary Feltman to the same sort of searches in our airport?" he asked. The incident had cast a "shadow" over Miqdad's visit, an unfortunate conclusion to an otherwise constructive trip to Washington. Still, Aala stressed, Miqdad looked forward to continuing the dialogue with U/S Burns.

Syria Miffed over Goldstone Report

15. (C) In a personal aside, Alaa noted he had received the Embassy's dipnote conveying ref B points on UN General Assembly debate regarding the Goldstone Report. Though not under instructions to do so, Aala reported his reaction was negative. How, he asked, could the U.S. lobby Arab countries to "brush the report under the carpet," while "giving Israel a pass" on the use of its military against innocent civilizations? In the face of such "aggression," Arab countries believed their only alternative was to raise Israeli behavior in international fora. No one in the Arab world, he commented, believed the Israeli government was capable of mounting an objective investigation into the Israeli army's conduct in Gaza. Charge and Pol/Econ Chief reiterated Ref B points, stressing the importance of establishing an environment more conducive to comprehensive peace negotiations.

16. (C) Aala took this point, but argued the Israeli government itself was the major obstacle to peace because of its provocative refusal to continue settlement expansion. Aala confirmed the MFA had in the end decided not to attend the BMENA conference. He said the SARG had reacted negatively to the Secretary's comments in Israel regarding

Israeli's position on settlement; her statements in Morocco regarding the U.S. position on settlements were "better received." (Note: The Italian Ambassador told CDA the previous night that FM Muallim had in fact made plans to attend the Forum for the Future meeting in Morocco but canceled them in displeasure over the vote by Italy and other European countries in Geneva on the Goldstone report.)

17. (C) Comment: Miqdad's invitation to U/S Burns reflects growing SARG confidence, while conveying an unmistakable desire to move the relationship forward at a higher level, probably to include meetings with President Asad. This gambit allows Syria to demonstrate its interest in continuing the dialogue, albeit on terms that signal its dissatisfaction with our current focus on security issues at the working level. Post sees merit in giving careful consideration to the Syrian proposal; at the very least, accepting it would help to undercut Syrian claims that the U.S. is dragging its feet. It might also set the stage for a frank exchange with the one Syrian decision maker whose opinion matters -- namely, President Asad -- on the future of U.S.-Syrian engagement and on key issues related to Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinians.

18. (C) Comment continued: If Washington opts to stay with the current plan, we suggest that stealing a page from the Syrian playbook would offer a range of possible responses to

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explain U/S Burns' inability to accept the invitation at this time. Scheduling conflicts, the urgent demands of unfolding regional events, and Washington's desire to move quickly to maintain the momentum all require a visit at the A/S-level to Damascus sooner, rather than an U/S visit later. We can emphasize the importance of focusing on timing and substance, including political relations, rather than allowing the Syrians to equate the level of representation with "political context." We might also nudge the working-level process along with a higher-level message (e.g., an U/S phone call) to pave the way in advance. We can most improve our position by providing the Syrians a clearer sense of what would constitute a successful working-level CT dialogue and the steps we would be prepared to take if this outcome were achieved.

HUNTER